

How Banville Makes the Banal Beautiful

Como Banville Torna o Banal Belo

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When growing up, I was spoilt for choice when it came to literary influences and idols. I was born to an island of literary giants whose achievements and accolades I could only wonder at. I grew up reading Yeats, Joyce, Longley, Heaney, McCabe and Banville. As an aspiring writer, this was often intimidating and sometimes paralysing. I remember reading Banville's prose in awe and my early writing tried to mimic his wondrous phrases and clear, concise, poetic descriptions. Of course I'm no Banville, just like Banville is no Joyce.

Years later I was calmed when I read an interview with Banville in which he spoke about the very same worries when he started out. It made me feel like I was on the same path, somehow by thinking like him I could maybe emulate a hint of his successes.

He depicts my worries ever-so eloquently in an interview with the Paris review: "This is a problem for Irish writers – our literary forebears are enormous. They stand behind us like Easter Island statues, and we keep trying to measure up to them, leaping towards heights we can't possibly reach. I suppose that's a good thing, but it makes for a painful early life for the writer." I have long since given up trying to measure myself to the likes of Banville and have happily returned to being in awe at his craft of storytelling, the exploration of moments that seem somewhat banal, yet encapsulate what it is to be alive.

Banville's publication record is a feat of its own and his novels speak for themselves, but what most influenced me most (apart from *The Sea*, which I read as an adult) was his first collection of short stories. *Long Lankin* is a collection of nine stories and one novella, it is a book that Banville himself is now almost revolted at having written, but a book, nonetheless, that inspired me greatly. It was written when his genius as a novelist was yet to be discovered. Although his later books are more complete and rewarding for a reader, when I think of Banville, it is always the short stories in *Long Lankin* that come to mind.

Maybe that is because it is the first work of his I read and therefore was the first time I was introduced to his sentences. He has spoken so frequently about getting as close as he can to the perfect sentence and how he often spends months trying to get it right. His lyrical prose in the stories enticed me with their rhythm and musicality. How each sentence seemed to be a short melody, how each repetition became a motif, each full stop forms a perfect cadence. I am not saying for one second that this is the best of Banville, his future novels go on to explore and perfect his style and read altogether more polished and clean, but to a young writer those short stories conveyed an Ireland I knew too well, while also making it altogether different.

Some of the stories do lack in a steady build of tension or a tangible conflict and the novella leaves a lot to desire but I overlooked these the first time I read them, and have continued to do so because Banville still brings the worlds clearly and magically to the reader's eye. Whether it be about sitting in the woods by a fire "About him the wood was silent, yet

beneath the silence there were movements and strange sounds, strange stirrings and rustlings in the trees.” Or his concise insights into a feeling, “the strange clarity of vision and thought which follows exhaustion now came over him.” It is clear to see that Banville marvels at the world and the everyday phenomena that we forget to notice and this is clear in his winding, striking passages of language.

The stories mostly deal with two main characters in each, and the third silent “Larkin” that enters flawlessly to create conflict. Larkin coming from the old ballad in which there is a horrific murder of a baby. Banville embodies this tale throughout the stories that are set in a contemporary Ireland. He brings to life some terse, eerie stories that haunt the reader, not only through the plot and developments, but through the persistently pressing prose.

The themes are varied but in the stories there is always this pursuit of freedom, which Banville himself felt as a youth, and which resonated with me as a teenager. The stories also deal with the process of writing and the role of the writer. Banville explores this in “The Death” when Stephen reveals “I was going to write a book. A love story. The story of Stephen and Alice who thought that love would last forever. And when they found it wouldn’t or at least that it changed so much that they couldn’t recognise it anymore the blow was too heavy.” (1984. 31)

It is this that rings true in all of Banville’s writing, the connection between writing and life, and the importance of that connection. By writing, Banville does not create the world in which we live in but creates an almost identical one where life experiences are dealt with so exquisitely that they feel like our own. That in this almost-our-world there is reason to the madness, that we can see that glint in the corner of our eye more clearly, that we can understand, or at least, calm whatever it is that beats inside of us like waves constantly crashing into nothing upon an empty shore.